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By-Moore, William
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Choral speaking in the classroom can heighten students' appreciation of poetry and give them an opportunity to express emotion in groups rather than as individuals. For first attempts at choral speaking, material with a humorous or a ghostly flavor, a good strong rhythm, and a narrative line should be selected. Both the teacher and the students should study the material carefully to determine its literary aspects and an appropriate oral reading. The class can be divided into light, medium, and dark voices; two groups of different sizes can speak antiphonally; or solo voices can work along with groups of different sizes. Like singing choirs, speaking choirs work best if there is a conductor as a focal point. Enjoyment of literature and creative oral expression is the primary objective of this group activity. (JS)

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Choral Speaking

William Moore

Choral speaking, choral reading, dramatic choral interpretation, call it what you will, is an enjoyable way of sharing some of the pleasures of literature.

The desire to express emotion orally is as old as man's ability to speak. The ancients, like their Navaho counterparts today, chanted and spoke together when they wished to approach their gods, and it is interesting to note that the earlier Greek plays contain more lines for the chorus than for the individual actors. Although, in the classical period, the chorus element dwindled, it never completely disappeared, but remained as an integral part of the drama. In 1922, when John Masefield, working with Marjorie Gullan, established the annual verse speaking Festival at Oxford, he gave impetus to the revival of an almost forgotten art.

The values inherent in speaking chorally are many, not the least being a heightened appreciation of poetry, an art dependent upon the spoken language, and a freedom to express emotion in groups rather than as individuals. A speech choir is a wonderful socializing force, where the new member is quickly assimilated. If he happens to use speech forms which are careless and slovenly, he soon finds that the group moulds him towards better speech.

Choice of Material

At the beginning it is advisable to pick a piece which has either humour or a ghostly flavour, as these are the two types most likely to appeal to children. These are not the only kinds of prose or poetry which may be done chorally, but at the beginning they are more likely to succeed. The selection must also have a good strong rhythm.

But do not make the mistake of choosing one with so pronounced a rhythmic pattern that the children get lost in the beat and forget the meaning. Ballads can be a deadly trap for the inexperienced. It helps if the piece you begin with also tells a story.

Thus we see the three essentials for the inexperienced class:

(a) A touch of humour or ghostly flavour
(b) A good strong rhythm
(c) Narrative

Later, of course, you will work away from these confining rules. There is no reason why a class should not try lyric verse, non-narrative and non-humorous, later on.

Preliminary Work

Before you work with your group on any poem or piece of prose, you must make them aware of some of the things we can do with the human voice. Discuss with them variety in volume, from the whisper to the shout. Demonstrate how changes in speed or tempo can add to a reading. Show the value of the pause and the innumerable "tunes" the voice can play; the way in which intensity can underline meaning and emotion. All these things can be discussed and practised, using simple or complex material.

Method of Attack

First of all choose a piece which adheres to the above-mentioned requirements. But there is one more point—*Pick one that appeals to you*. If the students realize that you think this particular choice is good and worth tackling, then you can convince them. If you do not like a selection, avoid teaching it.

But how are you to prepare yourself to teach it?

(1) Take it home, and work on it. Read it through several times silently. Decide where you think the emphasis should fall. Decide how you think the inflections should come. Then read it aloud to hear if it sounds right. If you can find some person to listen to you, read it to him. A tape recorder is a great help. After several readings like this, you will know the selection. This is good, as you should really be familiar with it—practically know it inside out—by the time you stand up in front of the class and read it to them.

(2) Now you are there—prepared and ready to teach the selection to the class. But remember that choral speaking is only one of many many ways of consolidating what you have taught in a literature lesson, and is best if taken in small doses. This is a *suggested* method of teaching a piece of, say, twenty lines length.

(a) Read it to the class. Listening must be motivated.
(b) Teach the literature of the piece. (As much as it demands and requires. You might make this a complete lesson in itself, and not start on the choral part until the next time.)
(c) Begin teaching it chorally.
  (i) Read the first phrase or line.
  (ii) Mark any special emphasis on inflection.
  (iii) Have the class do the line or phrase. You say it along with them.
  (iv) Do the next bit in the same way—read, mark, together.
  (v) Put part one and two together and so on.

In this way you gradually build the interpretation. Do a little at a time. Ten to fifteen minutes at a stretch is ample. Later, you will find that you do more and more in the period. Keep recapitulating, and in this way the children will learn the selection with the desired inflections and emphasis.

This may be a little slow, but it is thorough. If you are not willing to do a complete job, better leave it alone. But, like everything else, this can be overdone. Do one a month, and you will keep interest high.

A Few Final Words

All this might sound very dictatorial, and might seem to take away that freedom of expression which we all feel to be important. In a way perhaps it is, and yet it seems sensible to guide the footsteps before we allow the child to run off on his own. In the beginning the leader, the teacher, the director, whatever you like to call him, must be quite specific, and make most of the decisions, but before long the group will have enough experience to be able to take over more and more of the interpretation of the piece.

The method of attack mentioned in the previous section appears to apply to unison speaking only, but with small amendments it can work for various other forms of interpretation. One way of dividing the group for variety is to have sections of light voices, medium voices and dark voices. These are somewhat analagous to musical divisions, and help to give the choir body. If you have a group divided up this way, then each section can speak certain phrases, as the sense of the piece demands.

Another way of splitting away from total unison is to work antiphonally. In this technique you divide your choir into two unequal groups, and they speak alternate phrases. The psalms, for example, lend themselves very well to this treatment.

Solo voices can work along with groups of different sizes, as can small groups of say three or four voices. Many of the methods of distributing voices in singing choirs can be tried most effectively with the speaking choir.

The way you group your speakers can make quite a difference to the final effect. Generally it is a good idea to work on your poem or piece of prose with the group seated comfortably, but as soon as they have a reasonable control over the selection, stand them up at the front of a room, on a platform or on risers. Remember that the tighter the choir is grouped, the better sound you will get from them.

To conduct or not to conduct? Most singing choirs sing better when they have a conductor as a focal point. The same is true for speaking choirs. The main difference between conducting music and speech is that in music we have accepted forms of annotation, rhythms, and conducting styles. With a speech choir you are on your own, to devise your own symbols for giving directions. If you always use the same signals, you will find that the group will soon operate smoothly and with discipline.

With little children, below grade three for example, it is a good idea to work without a script; but like all the suggestions made here, this one can be ignored if your group feels more comfortable another way.

In her book *The Art of Choral Speaking* Cecile de Banke says this:

There are four objectives in the teaching of choral speaking: the revival of pride in correct and expressive speech, the restoration of the art of spoken poetry, the encouragement of individual creative work, and the recognition of the value of group achievement.

All of this seems to add up to "enjoyment".

(Editor's note: If you want to try this choral reading approach to poetry, here are some writers Bill Moore recommends you begin with.)

Primary grades
Rose Fyleman
Zhenya Gay
Grades 4, 5, and 6
A. A. Milne
Robert Louis Stevenson
Grades 7 and up
Vachel Lindsay
Lew Sarrett
John Masefield
Walt Whitman
Sam Burke